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SUBJECT: FLOTUS VISIT HIGHLIGHTS AFGHAN PROGRESS

11. (U) The June 8 visit of First Lady Laura Bush to Afghanistan highlighted themes of critical interest to both Afghans and Americans. Mrs. Bush's visit to Kabul and to the province of Bamyan illustrates our assessment that important progress is being made in many parts of the country. In those areas where good governance is being implemented, opportunities for Afghan women to advance socially and professionally have also improved. The allied commitment to Afghanistan is strong, with a large and diverse set of international partners sharing the security and development burden; Mrs. Bush was received at the New Zealand-run PRT in Bamyan, with a rousing traditional Maori Haka dance welcome. Those who work on the ground here are convinced that success is being achieved. For our Afghan partners, this visit reinforced America's commitment to the Afghan people through several poignant human vignettes which tell stories sometimes lost against a media diet weighted toward coverage of remaining security and military challenges. The partnership message was reinforced by both sides during a meeting with President Karzai at the Palace.

12. (U) In Bamyan, Mrs. Bush, U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Wood, and the First Lady's party met with Habiba Surabi, Afghanistan's first (and only) female governor. Surabi's appointment as governor serves as a visible role model for Afghan women that extends far beyond Bamyan's provincial borders. In a meeting with three female police officers, one was asked "Why do you want to be a police woman?" to which she responded, "If Goernor Surabi (i.e. as a woman) can take on such heavy responsibilities, so can I." Asked about how her children feel about their mother being a policewoman, the response was "They support me. My daughter (in the 4th grade) says that when she grows up she also wants to be a policewoman...or the governor!" The larger lesson for Afghanistan is that change is possible, and where good governance is being implemented, as in Bamyan, change takes place more rapidly. Afghanistan's newly established Independent Directorate for Local Government's (IDLG) is tasked with ensuring that the best possible candidates are selected for provincial and local office, and with following up so that local governance issues are addressed quickly and effectively. Governor Surabi is a beneficiary of this improved process, and during the visit she thanked the USG government repeatedly for its assistance in helping her to better help the people of Bamyan.

13. (U) This was Mrs. Bush's third visit to Afghanistan, and her Bamyan stop was the furthest she has ventured from Kabul. This spotlights another key theme that much of this country is "Afghan normal," still desperately poor, but where average citizens go about their lives in relative peace, although struggling with poverty, weak institutions, and sometimes weak leaders.

14. (U) PRT Bamyan is led by New Zealand, highlighting the broad

scope of active international participation here. This is something that matters deeply to Afghanistan's people and current leaders. This is a country with a long history of foreign interventions and home-grown abuses and Afghans are understandably cautious about the nature and depth of the international commitment. Put bluntly, many Afghans don't really believe that we will stay for the long-haul and so hedge their bets against a day when foreign troops and assistance will no longer serve as a buffer against renewed domestic conflict. Confronting the Afghan challenge requires many things, not the least of which is time for progress to take place and for entrenched attitudes to change. On the positive side, and something that is historically unprecedented here, sixty-five percent of Afghans believe that the international military presence is a good thing and support our efforts. Development is taking place and increasing numbers of Afghans are enjoying the benefits of new roads, available health care, and education. Mrs. Bush's visit comes at an opportune time, just ahead of the important Paris Donor's Conference, to further reinforce to all sides our long-term commitment.

15. (U) Mrs. Bush's well-known passion for education made her an ideal interlocutor to showcase the quiet revolution in Afghan schooling and the changing role of women in Afghanistan. Almost six million Afghan youth are in school, more than at any time in the country's history, and a third of them are girls. The threat that this poses to the Taliban is clearly illustrated by the insurgency's continued assault on schools and teachers in areas where they hold sway, but this battle for the next generation is being engaged and is being won by local communities and the government of Afghanistan, in partnership with the international community. Mrs. Bush reinforced our financial support for improving education in Afghanistan, announcing a new USAID "Learning and Community

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Empowerment 2" program which will reach 312,000 people, mostly women, with improved education and livelihood skills, and pledged continued support for the American University of Afghanistan. She also cut a ribbon at a ground-breaking ceremony for a new section of paved road in Bamyan, extending the town's only paved road (1.75 kilometers long, completed last year with USG support) by almost 2 kilometers. All politics are local, and here, as elsewhere, roads matter.

16. (U) Mrs. Bush and her party, which also included Under Secretary for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky, also visited an orphanage being constructed with funding from the Bayat Foundation, with support from the NGO Ayenda and the U.S.-Afghan Womens' Council. The emergence of civil society and NGO organizations is another sign that Afghanistan is progressing out of the darkness of the past three generations.

17. (U) In their meeting with President Karzai, the party had an opportunity to share ideas with young students from Kabul University, the American International School, and the American University of Afghanistan. Both Mrs. Bush and President Karzai offered statements to the press, emphasizing the significance of the visit and its timing, just prior to the Paris Support Conference.

18. (U) Finally, it is important for our coalition partners also to see this additional evidence of America's positive involvement here. Combined with the supportive rhetoric on both sides of our political aisle, visits like this one illustrate that America's commitment is broad and deep and is helping the Afghan people to achieve important results. Although this was a short visit, it was hugely productive and made a timely contribution to our national and international effort. The visit ended with stop at Bagram AFB, where Mrs. Bush addressed enthusiastic troops from the 101st airborne division which, as always, provided superb logistical support.

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